

Study examines correlation between race and police force size

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Empirical studies have long shown that crime rate and budget alone do not account for the size of an area's police force. Police forces tend to be larger in areas where blacks comprise a larger percentage, and many sociologists have attributed this to racial attitudes, specifically the white population's perceptions of threat.

A thought-provoking new study is the first to empirically examine this premise. It finds that while direct measures of antiblack prejudice are not correlated to police size, whites' fear of crime and perceived economic threat account for more than one-third of the effect of the proportion of black residents on police force size.

"No research has examined directly whether levels of whites' perceived minority threat mediate the effects of racial composition and racial segregation on police force size or other indicators of crime control," explain Brian J. Stults (Florida State University) and Eric P. Baumer (University of Missouri, St. Louis) in the current issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*. "Our analysis contributes to the literature by examining some of the most commonly mentioned mechanisms believed to explain the link between the size and distribution of racial groups and the capacity for crime control."

To test possible variables – including political threat, economic threat, and fear of crime – Stults and Baumer used data from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies' General Social Survey. For example, a measure of the level of fear expressed by whites in a sample area was

constructed by aggregating responses to a question about whether or not the respondent was afraid to walk in the neighborhood alone at night.

Controlled for the actual crime rate and the rate of interracial homicide, the researchers found no evidence that perceived black political threat among whites translated into differences in police force size. The researcher's gauge of antiblack prejudice – as measured by a standardized scale used in prior research, including the percentage of whites who oppose a close relative or family member marrying a black person– also did not explain the relationship between racial context and police size.

However, the two other factors the researchers considered – economic threat and whites' fear of crime – are significantly associated with police force size. Notably, the researchers also found that the number of police officers per capita increases considerably – about 15 percent – as one goes from all-white areas to those in which about a quarter of the residents are black. Equally important, as the percentage of the black population continues to increase, the increase to the size of the police force begins to level off and even decline. The researchers observed a similar curvilinear effect of whites' fear of police force size.

Source: University of Chicago

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